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Engineers on the exploitation of Eppawala phosphate deposits

The Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka, has made the following public announcement on the exploitation of phosphate deposits at Eppawala and has made three main recommendations.

The Institution of Engineers has a mandate to advise the public and the government on matters pertaining to Engineering. In pursuance of this mandate, it held a seminar in October 1998 to investigate the proposals that had been published for the exploitation of the Eppawala rock phosphate deposits.

It invited not only engineers but also other scientists to participate in this seminar, to take a broad view of the issues involved. Following this seminar, an expert group chaired by the then president of the institution (Mr. Newton Wickramasuriya) studied the issues further and made a submission to the government. At about the same time, other scientific institutions such as the Institute of Chemistry also made submissions to the government.

Acting on the report submitted by the Institution of Engineers, the Minister of Science and Technology constituted a comprehensive scientific committee to study the issues raised. This committee consisted of engineers and scientists from all the related fields, and was chaired by Mr. Newton Wickramasuriya. Dr. Gamini Gunasekera of the National Science Foundation functioned as its secretary/convenor. The committee functioned from the National Science Foundation. The NSF committee recommendations were in consonance with those of the Institution of Engineers.

The Institution of Engineers expects the public and the government to give consideration to the

views expressed by the institution when arriving at a decision on the manner in which Eppawala rock phosphate is to be exploited. It is happy that its views are shared by the wider scientific community and that they are reflected in the official recommendations made by the NSF committee.

The main recommendations

Considering that rock phosphate is an exhaustible natural resource, essential for continued plant and animal life, it has to be exploited conservatively; that is, it should be reserved for the use of local agriculture. Given the extent of proven resources and the estimated requirements for local agriculture, an exploitation rate not in excess of 350,000 tons per annum is recommended.

Considering the suitability for agriculture, environmental and archaeological impact, cost and the economics and technology of manufacture of the different forms of soluble phosphate fertilisers, Single Super Phosphate fertiliser is recommended as the preferred form for local manufacture and use.

Given the recommended rate of exploitation and the recommended technology, the field of prospective enterprises capable of setting up operations is wide open. Local public and private sector organisations should be encouraged to acquire the necessary technology, either directly or in collaboration with regional or global partners.

Fresh tenders should be called for the phased setting up of a medium scale plant for the manufacture of Single Super Phosphate fertiliser, so as to identify the best option available.